

## Where Yap-Yap the Prairie Dog Used His Wits

by Thornton W. Burgess

Peter Rabbit had just had a great fright. He is used to having great frights, but this time it was a different kind of a fright. It was not for himself that he had been afraid but for one of his old friends and neighbors. Now that it was over, Peter drew a little breath of sheer relief.

You see it was this way: Peter had started over for a call on Johnny Chuck. When he reached Johnny Chuck's house he found no one at home. At first he thought he would go look for Johnny, for he knew that Johnny must be somewhere near, as he never goes far from his own doorstep. Then he changed his mind and decided to wait for Johnny to return. So he stretched himself out in some tall grass beside Johnny Chuck's house, intending to jump out and give Johnny a scare when he came home. Hardly had he settled himself when he heard Johnny coming, and he knew by the sounds that Johnny was running from some danger.

Very, very carefully Peter raised his head to see. Then he ducked it again and held his breath. Johnny Chuck was running as Peter never had seen him run before and with very good reason. Just a few jumps behind Johnny's twinkling little black heels was Old Man Coyote. It looked to Peter as if Old Man Coyote certainly would catch Johnny Chuck this time. He was so frightened for Johnny that he quite forgot that he himself might be in danger. Head first through his doorway plunged Johnny, and Old Man Coyote's teeth snapped together on nothing.

Old Man Coyote backed away a few steps and sat down with his head on one side as he studied Johnny Chuck's house in the ground. It was plain to be seen that he was trying to make up his mind whether it would be worth while to try to dig Johnny out. Presently Johnny came half-way up his long hall where he could look out. Then he began to scold Old Man Coyote. Old Man Coyote grinned.

"I give up, Johnny Chuck," said he. "You did well when you made your home between the roots of this old tree. If it wasn't for those roots, I certainly would dig you out. As it is you are safe. You remind me very much of your cousin, Yap-Yap the Prairie Dog, who lives out where I came from. There's a fellow who certainly knows how to make a house in the ground. He doesn't have to depend on the roots of trees to keep from being dug out. Well, I guess it is a waste of time to hang around here. You'll make just as good a dinner some other time as you would now, so I'll wait until then." Old Man Coyote grinned wickedly and trotted off.

Now at the mention of Yap-Yap the Prairie Dog, the long ears of Peter Rabbit had pricked up at once. It was the first time he had heard of Yap-Yap, and when at last Johnny Chuck ventured out Peter was as full of questions as a pea-pod is of peas. But Johnny Chuck knew nothing about his cousin, Yap-Yap, and wasn't even interested in him. So finally Peter left him and went back home to the dear Old Briar-patch. But he couldn't get Yap-Yap out of his mind, and he resolved that the first chance he got he would ask Old Man Coyote about him. The chance came that very night. Old Man Coyote came along by the dear Old Briar-patch and stopped to peer in and grin at Peter. Peter grinned back, for he knew that under those friendly brambles he was quite safe.

"I heard what you said to Johnny Chuck about his cousin, Yap-Yap," said Peter.

Old Man Coyote looked as surprised as he felt. "Where were you?" he demanded gruffly.

"Lying flat in the grass close by Johnny Chuck's house," replied Peter, and grinned more broadly than ever.

"And to think I didn't know it!" sighed Old Man Coyote. "When I failed to catch Johnny Chuck, I thought I had missed only one dinner, but it seems I missed two. Next time I shall look around a little more sharply. Do you know, the sight of Johnny Chuck always makes me homesick, he reminds me so much of his cousin, Yap-Yap, and the days when I was young."

"I didn't know that Johnny Chuck had a cousin until you mentioned it," said Peter. "Does he look like Johnny? Won't you tell me about him, Mr. Coyote?"

"Seeing that I haven't anything in particular to do, I don't know but I will," replied Old Man Coyote, who happened to be feeling very good-natured. "Many and many a time I have chased Yap-Yap into his house. Seems as if I can hear the rascal scolding me and calling me names right this minute. He used to get me so provoked that it was all I could do to keep from trying to dig him out."

"Why didn't you?" asked Peter.

"Because it would have meant a waste of time, sore feet, and nothing to show for my trouble," retorted Old Man Coyote. "Yap-Yap never has forgotten what his great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather learned when he first took to living on the open prairie."

"What did he learn? Tell me about it, Mr. Coyote," begged Peter.

"He learned to use his wits," replied Old Man Coyote, with a provoking grin. "He learned to use his wits, that's all."

"Please tell me about it, Mr. Coyote. Please," begged Peter.

"Once upon a time," began Old Man Coyote, "so my grandfather told me, and he got it from his grandfather, who got it from his grandfather, who—"

"I know," interrupted Peter. "It happened in the days when the world was young."

Old Man Coyote looked at Peter very hard as if he had half a mind not to tell the story, but Peter looked so innocent and so eager that he began again. "Once upon a time lived the great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather of Yap-Yap, the very first of all the Prairie Dogs, and his name was Yap-Yap too. He was own cousin to old Mr. Woodchuck, who of course wasn't old then, and the two cousins looked much alike, save that Yap-Yap was a little smaller than Mr. Woodchuck and perhaps a little smarter looking.

"From the very beginning Yap-Yap was a keen lover of the great open spaces. Trees were all very well for those who liked them, but he preferred to have nothing above him but the blue, blue sky. It seemed to him that he never could find a big enough open space, so he never stayed very long in any one place, but kept pushing on and on, looking for a spot in the Great World that would just suit him. At last he came to the edge of the Green Forest, and before him, as far as he could see, stretched the Green Meadows. At least it was like the Green Meadows, only a million thousand times as big as the Green Meadows we are on now, Peter, and was really the Great Prairie.

"Yap-Yap looked and looked, then he drew a long breath of pure joy and started out across the green grass. On and on he went, until when he sat up and looked this way or that way or the other way he could see nothing but grass and flowers, and over him was naught but the blue, blue sky. He had found the great open space of which he had dreamed, and he was happy. So he ate and slept and played with the Merry Little Breezes and grew fat.

"Then one day came Skimmer the Swallow and brought him news of the hard times which had come to the rest of the Great World and how as a result the big and the strong were hunting the small and the weak in order that they themselves might live. When Skimmer had gone, Yap-Yap grew uneasy. What if some of the big and strong people he had known should come out there in quest of food and should find him? There was no place in which to hide. There was no cave or hollow log.

"Yap-Yap looked at the strong claws Old Mother Nature had given him and an idea came to him. He would dig a hole in the ground. So he dug a hole on a long slant very much like the hole of Johnny Chuck; but when it was finished a little doubt crept into his head and grew and grew. What was to prevent some one who was very hungry from digging him out? So he moved on a little way and started another hole, and this time he made it almost straight down. Every day he made that hole deeper until it was many feet deep. Then he made a turn in it and dug a long tunnel, at the end of which he hollowed out a comfortable bedroom and lined it with grass. When it was finished he was quite satisfied.

"'I don't believe,' said he, 'that any one will have the patience to dig to the bottom of this.'

"So at night he slept in his bed at the end of his long hall far below the surface, but all day he spent above ground, for he dearly loved the sunshine. All went well until there came a time of heavy rains. Then Yap-Yap discovered that the water ran down his hole, and if he didn't do something, he was likely to be drowned out. Right away he set his sharp wits to work. He noticed that when the water on the surface reached the little piles of sand he had made, it ran around them. So he made a great mound of sand around his hole with the entrance in the middle and pressed it firm on the inside so that the rain would not wash it down in. Then, although the water stood all around, it no longer ran down in his house. In fair weather that mound was a splendid place on which to sit and watch for danger. So once more Yap-Yap was happy and care-free, all because he had used his wits.

"And from that day to this the Prairie Dogs have made their houses in just that way, and no one that I know cares to try to dig one out," concluded Old Man Coyote.

Source:

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